

CREATING LIVING TRUSTING

HEBREWS 10:16 

This is the covenant that I will make with them.

*After these days, says the Lord,
I will place my laws in their hearts
And write them on their minds.*

CREATING

GENESIS 9:12a 

*God said, "This is the symbol of the covenant
that I am drawing up between me and you
and every living thing with you."*

GOD ESTABLISHES THE COVENANT to be in relationship with us. So the first eight weeks, **Creating the Covenant**, examines how the covenant community is created and established—highlighting several examples throughout scripture.

It discusses the story of our origins in Genesis, the Exodus narrative, the teachings of Moses, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, as well as other books from each Testament that focus on the foundation of Christian faith.

In doing so, it lays out the framework for a life lived in concert with God and others.

CREATING

EPIISODE 1

Creating The Covenant

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

EPIISODE 1

Torah: Genesis

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

Meditation Guide

PARTICIPANT GUIDE 1

EPISODE 1—Creating the Covenant

RELATIONSHIPS

Reading the Bible to live and love well

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE COVENANT EXPERIENCE

During the first group meeting experience (Episode 1), you should try to accomplish the following things:

1. Give the participants a taste of the Covenant group experience.
2. Explain why covenant is a very important concept and pattern throughout the Bible.
3. Establish the expectations for the group: regular attendance, confidentiality, and respect for each other in conversation.
4. Show the brief orientation video presented by the cohosts.
5. Explain how to use the episodes in each participant guide and how they establish a daily and weekly rhythm for in-depth Bible study.
6. Talk briefly about the parts of a study Bible (table of contents, maps, notes, and so on) and other tools for Bible study (concordance, Bible dictionary, Gospel parallels). Direct participants to CovenantBibleStudy.com for other reliable online resources for Bible study.
7. Explain that you are signing up the group at CovenantBibleStudy.com to receive daily readings, calendar information, and more via e-mail. You will need each participant's e-mail address to register the group. Encourage participants with smart phones or tablets to visit the website and purchase the Covenant Bible Study app. They can view the participant guides digitally within the app. Other digital tools can be purchased there, as well.
8. Collect contact information for each participant (and have the group record e-mail addresses and phone numbers in their participant guides). Discuss child care needs, transportation concerns, and so on.
9. Pray for each other.



Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, *Creating the Covenant* DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils, nametags, a scrapbook or family photo album, a story or memory from your own family's past that locates and somehow defines who you are. Optional: Have your group read Deuteronomy 10 before this first session (or budget time to read it in the group meeting). Find more online resources, including bonus video content, at CovenantBibleStudy.com.

THE GOAL AND SCOPE OF COVENANT BIBLE STUDY

This Covenant experience will guide participants in a comprehensive, in-depth study of the Bible over the next several months. Unlike the learning participants may have experienced in other groups, this in-depth study of the whole Bible emphasizes the biblical concept of *covenant* as a unifying pattern through all the books in the Old and New Testaments. It underscores the unique relationship that God chooses to have with us as God's people. This relationship is grounded in the faithfulness of God's love and on our ongoing commitment to stay in love with God while we share signs of that love with others.

Each episode connects to an aspect of this covenant relationship, which is summarized in the heading of each participant guide:

Creating the Covenant: The first participant guide in eight episodes explores how a biblical covenant is created and established. It covers the stories about our origins in Genesis, the critical Exodus narrative about the freedom of God's people, the stories of a new teacher in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and other biblical books that highlight foundational aspects of Christian belief and practice.

Living the Covenant: This participant guide builds on the concept of covenant by applying it to actual relationships in everyday life. The books included in this set of eight episodes are instructive, such as the accounts of emerging leadership problems among the tribal chieftains, and then among the kings and prophets. It presents the spiritual and political crises that formed the early church; it searches for practical wisdom in the teachings of Israel's sages; and it considers the practical guidance found in Paul's letters as the emerging church learned how people of very different cultures can join together in a common mission.

Trusting the Covenant: This final participant guide tackles the loss of hope, which is restored by faithfulness in the midst of suffering. It explores the many ways that the biblical narrative encourages commitment to God when it is unreasonable and costly. The compelling story of Job, the stirring prophetic oracles during the Hebrew exile, and the imaginative symbolism of apocalyptic literature challenge and encourage us to faithful living.

During this first meeting, pass out participant guides and ask your group to open them.

Tip: Have participants pay for their guides at the first session. Some groups prefer to circulate a weekly envelope so participants can pay later (or even pay a little at a time, depending on your church's reimbursement policy or budget). Some participants, of course, will be purchasing the Covenant app on their smart phones or tablets.

Point out these features:

1. Notice the three distinct participant guides. There are three guides because some groups will meet for eight weeks, take a break, and then meet for the next set of episodes. A cautious participant may limit their investment to an eight-week experience, though the life-giving relationships formed in the group will usually draw reluctant participants into the full transforming experience.
2. Open the first guide, *Creating the Covenant*, and look at Episode 2 together. Describe the rhythm of the daily readings. Note:
3. The title (Torah: Genesis), episode theme (Who Are We?), learning objective (Creating covenants with God and others), list of daily Bible Readings, and "Our Longing for Relationship." Highlight the Covenant Prayer section where they will read aloud the prayers and scripture passages at the beginning of the session. Explain that the space between each prayer and scripture is for writing down individuals who come to mind as needing prayer. Let the participants know you will write down prayer concerns at the end of their session each week.
4. Point out the genre and scripture book introductions (such as Torah and Genesis) that participants will read on Day 1 each week. Emphasize that each daily scripture reading includes questions for thoughtful reflection. They will want to write any questions they have about the reading in the shaded area beside each reading summary. These questions and thoughts will stimulate group discussion at the weekly group meeting where the group will study a particular passage together.
5. Describe the Covenant Meditation exercise on Day 6 and how it may occasionally be done with the group in the weekly meeting.
6. The last section is the Group Meeting Experience discussed below.
7. Mention that in addition to the participant guides, each person should obtain a study Bible. The Covenant Edition of the *CEB Study Bible* is preferred. The digital edition of the *CEB Study Bible* is also available for purchase in the Covenant mobile app, and online access is available for purchase at CovenantBibleStudy.com. Other study Bibles are acceptable too, but trying a new study Bible that participants haven't used before will likely awaken fresh meaning. The notations in the *CEB Study Bible* will answer most questions or trigger new ones while the participant reads a biblical passage.



THE GROUP MEETING EXPERIENCE

Each *Covenant Bible Study* episode follows the same essential structure by balancing conversational teaching from biblical experts with engaging discussion among the participants. *Covenant* is designed so that the meaning of the Bible isn't found in just listening to a biblical scholar or listening to one's own inner voice. Only through conversation in community, in the Covenant Group Meeting Experience, can we discover the Bible's transformative power. During some weeks the group might be so full of energy and questions that conversation leaves less time for the video. That's okay. The spiritual energy that wakes up and transforms a life is the most important result from this kind of Bible study.

The structure of the Covenant leader guide is designed to create options for facilitators so the weekly group experience creates an encounter with scripture that changes lives. You will discover in the coming weeks what strategies work best in your group. There is often more to do in the leader guide than your group has time to accomplish in one sitting. Schedule a break in your group meetings (for a stretch or restroom break). Whether your group meets for seventy-five minutes or two hours (ninety minutes is the sweet spot), you can try each section in the leader guide during the first few weeks and see what works best with your group.

GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

The opening questions of this segment in each episode are designed to prompt conversation on a general topic that connects to the main theme of the episode. Begin by reading the scriptures in the Covenant Prayer section for Episode 1. Have one person say the phrase, "For those who . . ." and then the whole group responds by reading the scripture passage aloud (Neh 8:8 and then 8:10).

At this first meeting, ask the participants to think about a close personal relationship. The relationship might be with another human being, or it might be with an animal such as a dog or cat. Make a list of the relationships treasured in the group. In a column next to the list, write down the feelings that these relationships produce (e.g., contentment, anxiety, joy, avoidance, anger, safety, and so forth). Encourage someone to explain his feeling about this relationship through a story or anecdote. It might be a love story, or perhaps it comes from remembering a parent. (Examples: the day my dad taught me to drive; when my mom helped me shop for a prom dress; when my best friend introduced me to my future husband; when my brother wrecked my car.)

Ask the participants to reflect on why personal relationships with others and with God are important. (Answers might include: preventing loneliness, overcoming selfishness, managing appetites, sharing, forgiving wrongs, providing patience, humility, caregiving, children, and so forth.)

REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

This segment guides participants to share what they learned from the week's scripture readings with questions that tie their discoveries into a central theme. The study also encourages participants to memorize and share verses from the readings that they found particularly meaningful.

In the first participant guide, we establish the purpose of covenant in the Bible. The covenants are based on memories of God's promises to the families of Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Give participants a few minutes to scan over the section in Episode 1 titled "Life that Fits and Connects." Memories of divine promise are based on retelling stories, much like we retell a story by means of a scrapbook.

Bring a scrapbook or family photo album to the first group meeting (and consider asking participants in advance to bring one, too). Ask the participants to describe how their families preserve and remember ancestors and relatives. Ask for stories, and be prepared to tell a memory from your own family's past that locates and defines who you are, or perhaps that defines the hope and expectation you have for future generations. (Here is an example of a fruitful response: "After our parents divorced, my sister and I moved with my mom from California to North Carolina, where we started at a new school in a very different culture. I found that being the new kid was tough, but it also gave me a reboot on my self-image, and I have used that skill to restart my life several times over the years.")

The optional Tips sections offer leader reminders and practical suggestions for improving your Covenant group experience as a facilitator.

VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

Play the orientation video for Episode 1. The cohosts for this opening conversation are Reverend Shane Stanford, senior pastor at Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and Reverend Christine Chakoian, senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest, Illinois. They will meet with a different biblical scholar in each video episode.

Each video in the coming weeks features a conversation between the hosts and a biblical scholar around the Covenant table. Their conversation is a model for the kind of learning dynamic that is central to this study. The questions in this section of the Leader's Guide can be used at the conclusion of the video to prompt participants to reflect on the scholar's words in the context of their own discoveries. Encourage them to write down their own questions while they watch the video.

TAKE A BREAK (10 minutes)

Never underestimate the power of a well-placed break! Participants come back better able to focus and learn if they stretch, take a bathroom break, and talk to each other outside of the formal discussion. Be strict about time, though. Whether it's five or ten minutes, choose a time for breaks that works best with your group. Offline conversations and interactions with the group are key to your success as a group leader. The relationships you strengthen during these breaks are as important as any of the biblical ideas discussed.



DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

This segment in the following episodes builds on the insights of the biblical scholar and analyzes a single passage from the week's readings. The questions in the Group Meeting Experience section of the participant guide encourage a comprehensive look at the form, style, and central meaning of the scripture text. This segment will teach participants how to "go deeper" in the way they explore the Bible's meaning.

If you handed out the participant guides before the first meeting, or if individuals downloaded the participant guides to their mobile devices, assign a single Bible passage (Deuteronomy 10) to be read before the meeting, as well. It will be discussed briefly at the first meeting during this segment. Alternatively, if you wait for the first meeting, read Deuteronomy 10 aloud together, taking turns. Then ask the participants to separate into two groups and discuss by using the following questions:

1. How does the story in Deuteronomy 10 build on the story of the two stone tablets in Exodus 24:12-18? What did Moses do with those tablets? Why are the tablets still needed?
2. The covenant chest (called an "ark" in the KJV) is a container for God's presence, and the two tablets are a reminder of God's ten important expectations. Ask the two groups of participants to make a list of ten expectations they have for their closest personal relationship.

Bring the whole group together and discuss how committed relationships are based in faithful love and mutual responsibility. Be sensitive to those who have been hurt by broken relationships or betrayals, and explain how scripture can guide us through forgiveness and reconciliation from painful experiences in our past.

CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

This segment provides a meditation, which is a devotional way to read the Bible. This is a critical part of the experience because it ensures the study experience is not only informative for the mind, but also formative for the heart. It will teach participants how to use imagination, prayer, and listening while reading scripture. These spiritual practices can strengthen their relationship with God. You may choose to have willing participants report on this experience (always located on Day 6 in the participant guide) if they are trying it at home. As an alternative, the leader guide includes this as a weekly group practice every week because some individuals are unfamiliar with this kind of meditation. Decide the best fit for your group; try it both ways, as individuals and as a group.

An additional book of *Covenant Meditations* (sixty-six distinct meditations, one per book in the Bible) is available for participants who find this type of scripture reading practice enriching. Here is an example from Ezekiel 36 in *Covenant Meditations*:

A new heart

When I make myself holy among you in their sight, I will take you from the nations, I will gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you to your own fertile land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.

Ezekiel 36:23c-26

Praying the word

At times our hearts harden. We become stubborn toward other people, different opinions and points of view, situations that make us uncomfortable, and even toward ourselves. After reading this scripture passage, sit quietly and reflect on the last time you felt your heart harden—or become “stony”—toward someone or something. What was happening at the time? Why did you respond with a stubborn heart? What would it take for your heart to soften again toward this person or circumstance? Offer a prayer that God might help your heart come alive again toward whatever caused your heart to become stony.

SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the “Signs of Faithful Love” at the end of this episode. Then remind them that they are committing to a twenty-four-week Covenant experience together where they will:

- read the Bible daily and write responses in their participant guides;
- pray for other members of the group each day;
- meet with the group every week;
- listen for God speaking through the Bible and each other; and
- invite the Holy Spirit to change their lives through exposure to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ encountered in the scriptures.

Participants are encouraged to conceive and share *tangible* ways that each week’s readings will alter their priorities and perspectives and shape their behavior.

Ask group participants who are willing to share how each has volunteered to serve or help others in the past. Make a list of the tangible things they have done for others, and affirm the scope and range of their experiences. (Some examples may include: mowing an aging neighbor’s lawn as they recover from surgery; mission trips to build housing for impoverished families at home or abroad; repairing playground equipment at a local park; providing transportation to doctor visits for those who no longer drive; tutoring second graders in basic math at a local elementary school; honoring first responders; and so on.) More examples of concrete things your group can do together or individually are found at CovenantBibleStudy.com.



CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Each session closes with a time for sharing prayer requests and concerns with each other. Encourage participants to write down each other's needs (in the next episode of their participant guides) and remember them each day in the upcoming week. Point out the particular concern for individuals who are struggling to find themselves, to know who they are or where they belong. Ask them to write these requests under the Covenant Prayer segment for Episode 2.

Finally, be sure to draw the group's attention again to "Our Longing for Relationship" at the beginning of each episode and "Signs of Faithful Love" at the end of each episode—at the times designated in the leader guide. These handles serve as helpful starting and ending markers for your group discussion, moving participants from positions of marginal commitment to high commitment in their path toward discipleship.

COVENANT

Leader Guide

PARTICIPANT GUIDE 1

EPISODE 2—Torah: Genesis

WHO ARE WE?

Creating covenants with God and others

The book of Genesis begins with the wide-angle view of God’s love—love for all of creation—and gradually zooms in to the love that shapes our relationships with each other. The daily readings from this week sequentially follow that progression:

- Day 1:** beginning with creation;
- Day 2:** Noah, Babel, and the human community;
- Day 3:** Abraham and the establishment of nationhood;
- Day 4:** Jacob and Israelite community; and
- Day 5:** family and kinship ties.

Each level of magnification has a unique way of supporting the overall theme of Genesis: God’s loving relationship with all of life and our call to be in loving relationships with God and each other.

This session will help your group:

- become familiar with the important biblical concept of covenant;
- discover how relationships in community can be broken and then restored through God’s love; and
- identify the different voices that tell the stories of Genesis.

Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, Creating the Covenant participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, Creating the Covenant DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils



1. GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Genesis uses ancestral stories to give meaning to community and to our relationship to God and the wider world. After the opening Covenant Prayer, divide participants into pairs, and invite them to share any stories they can think of that have been significant in shaping their family origins and their own identities. For example, to where does your family (birth or adopted) trace its origin, and what are the earliest stories you know about ancestors? How did your childhood experience in your family shape who you are today? Where does your name come from?

If participants prefer, they can also share stories related to any community to which they belong: their church, their neighborhood, or their country. How do these stories reveal insights into the character and identity of the participants' particular communities?

Tip: Before your group arrives, preview and test the DVD or video download on the television or computer you will be using. Listen for anything that seems unclear to you or challenging to your group's presuppositions about the Bible or about Genesis.

2. REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

Read together "Our Longing for Relationship" at the beginning of the episode. Invite participants to break up into pairs and share any passages from the week's readings that were particularly meaningful, along with any insights they received from the readings. They might also share any verses they chose to memorize for the week.

Read together the second paragraph of the introductory essay "Torah" on page twenty-two of the participant guide, and remind participants that the purpose of covenant is to explain:

- the purpose of a community,
- our relationship with God, and
- our role in the larger world.

Invite them to analyze the scripture readings from the week using these three criteria.

Divide participants into two groups, and have each group look more closely at the two main covenants introduced in this session: (1) Noah in Genesis 9:1-7 (God's covenant with all of life) and (2) Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17 (God's covenant to form a great nation). For each passage, have them answer these questions:

- What does this story tell us about God’s expectations for the community?
- What is God’s desired relationship to this community?
- What is the role that God calls this community to have with the outside world?

Each of these stories also contains evidence that human communities often fall short of God’s intent and become broken. Keeping the same two groups, have one group look more closely at the stories of Noah (Gen 6:5-22) and Babel (Gen 11:1-9), and have the other group look at the story of Joseph (Gen 37 and 45). For each story, have participants answer these questions:

- What is the threat facing God’s community in this story?
- Where do you see evidence of God’s love at work to restore community in this story?
- How are the people in this story called to be part of the solution?

3. VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

The video for Episode 2, on the DVD or available by download, allows the group to overhear a conversation with Theodore Hiebert, who is Professor of Old Testament at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. Before showing the video, have the participants listen for one or more of the following conversation points:

1. The book of Genesis is more than a book of beginnings; it answers the deepest human questions about who we are in the scheme of things. It’s about where we fit and what our responsibilities are as members of the human community and the broader community of life.
2. Family is the biggest and deepest influence on the understanding of covenant relationships in Genesis. The family relationships that define covenant for these writers are understood in terms of gift (it chose us, we didn’t choose it) and responsibility (there is a fitting way to respond).
3. The family/covenant relationships of Genesis are characterized by sibling rivalry, conflict, and the ever-present danger that the family will disintegrate. While wrong decisions and disobedience define the human characters from the first age (and beyond), these decisions are always about relationships: choosing for or against the relationship. However, with the exception of the brothers Cain and Abel, the family of Abraham finds a way to resolve differences through forgiveness and generosity.
4. God’s hand is seen in these stories as the power that works toward keeping all things together. God also calls privilege and authority into question by leveling the playing field on behalf of women, second sons, and others diminished by the dominant culture.

At the end of the viewing, ask them one or two of the questions below:

1. Did you grow up hearing any stories of how your “tribe” came to be a family? How did your parents or grandparents (or even great-grandparents) meet? Was there doubt or peril that put



your family tree in danger? Do you define who you are (and where you fit) more in terms of family relationships or something else (career, friendship groups, college sorority/fraternity, church, and so on)?

2. How or in what ways is your family a gift to you? What are the house rules or basic responsibilities that come with being part of a family (a daughter, son, sister, brother, mother, father, aunt, uncle, cousin, godparent)?
3. The Genesis families are plagued by rivalry and conflict. Can you think of any famous family rifts that didn't end well? What about in your own family? What role has forgiveness or generosity played in healing these family conflicts? Who has been Esau to Jacob (or Joseph to his brothers) in your clan?

TAKE A BREAK (10 min)

Learn something about someone in the group that you didn't already know.

4. DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

Break the participants into two subgroups and invite them to work with the Group Meeting Experience from Genesis 9:7-17 outlined in their participant guides.

5. CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Genesis reminds us that we are created in God's image and therefore have the same kind of imaginative capacity as the God who envisioned creation out of chaos. Reading the scriptures with our imaginations can therefore be an exercise of divine creativity, and it is an effective way to engage the stories of the Bible. Lead the participants through the Covenant Meditation on Genesis 1:26-31 found in their participant guides.

6. SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the "Signs of Faithful Love" at the end of the episode, then break the participants into pairs. Have them review for a moment any notes they recorded and any insights they gained related to the human responsibility of restoring broken communities back to God's loving intent. Just as the flow of the Genesis stories suggests, those responsibilities can range from the global (our responsibility to the environment and the whole created world) to our personal relationships with others (family and community). Have them share with each other how they feel called to particular service this week.

7. NEXT WEEK (5 min)

Turn to Episode 3 and briefly introduce next week's title and theme. Encourage participants to select a verse from the readings that they might commit to memory and share next week.

8. CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Ask for any prayer concerns or joys, and invite participants to write these items down in the space provided under next week's Covenant Prayer. This way, they will have them in front of them as they read throughout the week. Close in a prayer together.

